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Introduction

To A Cultural History of Democracy in the Age of Enlightenment 1650-1800

Michael Mosher and Anna Plassart

A Note on the Cover

Jacques-Louis David's sketch of the *Oath of the Tennis Court* registered the first disobedience to Louis XVI. On 20 June, 1789 the tripartite society of Estates (nobility, priests, and third estate) abolished itself to establish a unified, egalitarian assembly and a new iconography for the nation. In letting go of anchors in social hierarchy, these self-transforming political actors intimated the future promise of a democratic government that might remove barriers to equality; but for the years immediately ahead they foreshadowed the threat of a revolutionary assembly unanchored by anything but itself. The sketch rather than the finished painting underlines the idea of democracy as an unfinished task.

I. The Enlightenment and Democratic Modernity

This volume's stated ambition to offer a "cultural history of democracy in the age of Enlightenment" could at first sight appear incongruous, if not dangerously misguided. How could one, after all, write the "cultural history" of a political system which remained virtually non-existent for most of the period covered by this collection of essays? "Democracy", in as much as the word can be used to describe political life between 1650 and 1800, was confined to a handful of states which tended to see themselves not as "democracies", but rather as "republics" or "free states". At the dawn of the age of Enlightenment, Europe remained a monarchical society ruled by kings, princes, and emperors. It only comprised a handful of republican city-states – Venice, Genoa, Geneva, German free imperial cities –, all of which put drastic limitations on citizenship and/or the political rights of citizens (Green 2001). In the mid-seventeenth century, several additional republican states emerged from the European wars of religion, including the English Commonwealth (1649-1660) and Republic of Naples (1647-48), but also the Dutch Republic, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and a number of Swiss cantons. None of these, however, were fully "democratic" in the sense of popular participation in government and rulers' accountability to the people they ruled (Gelderen and Skinner 2002). It is only in the late eighteenth century that a series of wars ushered in an era of revolutions

that, at least in France, North America and the Caribbean, replaced the old monarchical framework with radically new institutions that grounded their legitimacy in popular consent. Even then, the “democratic” nature of these new regimes remains highly debatable – early American “democracy” excluded not only a large proportion of adult white males, but also all women as well as almost a million black slaves, while France’s Constitution of 1791 excluded large numbers of “passive” (non-tax-paying) citizens and all women.

The Age of Enlightenment, therefore, can hardly be described as “democratic” in terms of institutions or practices. Neither did the word or concept of “democracy” elicit much enthusiasm among contemporaries, as both remained highly ambiguous and contested throughout the period, and perhaps especially so towards its end point. There were exceptions. As early as 1744, the eccentric Marquis d’Argenson advocated introducing “democracy” into monarchical government (Keohane 1980: 376). As shown by Joanna Innes (chapter 10), the learned men and women of letters who knew and employed the term primarily used it to evoke ancient polities – but it was also used to describe some of the more dangerous tendencies of mixed or republican governments. Not until the very end of the period, with the American and French revolutions, did “democracy” begin to be discussed seriously as a political program, and did democratic constitutions become a conceivable (if still highly contentious) option for contemporaries.

Yet the Age of Enlightenment is widely considered as heralding an era of modern democratic progress: in twenty-first century discourse, the words “Enlightenment” and “democracy” both tend to be used as shorthand for “modernity”. It is commonly held that they emerged together, or perhaps more accurately that the Enlightenment gave birth to representative democracy, and therefore to modern liberal democracies, understood as the end point of a centuries-long process of progress. This “modernization thesis” – the idea that “the Enlightenment brought political modernization to the West, in terms of introducing democratic values and institutions and the creation of modern, liberal democracies” (De Dijn, 2012) – is usually traced back to post-war historical scholarship, and specifically to Peter Gay’s *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966, 1969, 1973). In contrast to the totalitarian ideologies that marked the mid-twentieth century, Gay claimed that the values that underpinned modern liberal representative democracies found their roots in Enlightenment ideas: “Enlightened politics”, he wrote, “is modern liberal politics.” Historians were quick to point out the obvious flaw in Gay’s argument: there is no whole-hearted endorsement of “modern liberal” politics, or indeed of

democratic politics, to be found in the writings of most enlightened philosophers. Nevertheless, this flattering portrait of the Enlightenment retains undeniable force in twenty-first century collective representations: this is what has been called “the iron grip of the modernization thesis over our historical imagination” (De Dijn, 2012). It has proved especially influential in Anglophone scholarship, with Judith Shklar, Robert Darnton, and – most recently and successfully – Jonathan Israel all defending versions of the idea that the roots of modern democratic institutions and values can be found in the Enlightenment (Israel 2001, 2010). Certainly, Israel’s “Radical” Enlightenment is inherently political in nature and democratic in aspirations. It attempts to articulate foundations for Western modernity and insists upon a set of values to be defended and reclaimed by twenty-first century democratic societies (La Vopa 2009, Lilti 2009).

Since at least Paul Hazard’s classic study *The Crisis of the European Mind* (1935), the traditional view has been that the Enlightenment took root with the writings of Locke and Bayle in the 1680s. This volume’s chronological boundaries coincidentally happen to mirror Israel’s chronology, placing the beginnings of the “Age of Enlightenment” in 1650, and thus paralleling his argument that the Enlightenment first flourished during Spinoza’s active writing and publication years in the 1660s and 1670s. This matches the view of Reinhart Koselleck for whom the “origins of enlightenment” began even earlier with “Hobbesian rationality” (1988:23, 33-4).

Israel’s thesis of an Enlightenment defined in terms of the dissemination of Baruch Spinoza’s ideas also revives a long tradition of attempts to provide a single, unitary definition of the Enlightenment. It is perhaps closest to Gay’s classic definition of the Enlightenment in terms of shared ideals such as rationality or toleration, and self-consciously inscribes itself against alternative later definitions formulated in terms of cultural exchanges and networks (Darnton 1982, Chartier 1991, Melton 2005). Of course, all “unitary” definitions are open to challenges regarding their comprehensiveness.

An alternative strand of scholarship, predating Israel’s landmark study but also developed in active response to it, has proposed a different response to the problem of definition, by challenging the notion of a “unitary” Enlightenment, and in the process deconstructing its reputation for being umbilically tied to the notions of “modernity” and “democracy” which frame so much of the West’s collective sense of identity. The first move in this scholarly shift was to recover the distinctness of “national” enlightenments: the argument was pioneered in

the 1980s (Porter and Teich 1981), and a wide variety of distinct “Enlightenments” have since been identified by scholars, including – and not limited to – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and “secular” Enlightenments (Sorkin 2008, Lehner 2016, Jacob 2019), conservative and reformist Enlightenments (Pocock 1989), local, European and Global Enlightenments (Conrad 2012). Plural Enlightenments, in other words, have increasingly been substituted for the Enlightenment. John Pocock put it succinctly in volume one of *Barbarism and Religion*: “we can no longer write satisfactorily of ‘the Enlightenment’ as a unified universal movement” (Pocock 1999: 13). This “premise,” as he called it, justified the title of the opening volume: *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*. The advantage of plural Enlightenments, Pocock argued, was that they tracked the idiosyncratic ways differently situated writers in relatively far flung social milieux conceived of their tasks. Pocock’s approach allowed him to track contingencies and identified boundaries because it was not on the lookout for one encompassing definition.

Yet behind the proliferating cultures and Enlightenments, a new historiographical question pushes its way forward. Are the differences so great that we must not only delete the demonstrative adjective ‘the’ but also the substantive noun “Enlightenment?” It may well be only by courtesy to a bygone tradition that nearly any subject from the designated time period is given an “Enlightenments” merit badge. Indeed, it is worth noting that the ten essays that follow all reflect upon the theme of “democracy” in the period 1650-1800, without devoting much space to high-level concepts of, or grand narratives about either “the Enlightenment”, or “Enlightenments”. If “democracy” is not (or not only) understood in relation to the Enlightenment “origins” of modern liberal representative democracies, where should we then look for “democracy” in the long eighteenth century, in what form and with what purpose? A necessary first step is to critically examine the word “democracy” and acknowledge that it covers several overlapping meanings including not only institutions, but also political concepts and lived practices. Recasting “democracy” in this way allows us to move beyond the historiographical concept of “Enlightenment” to argue that far from being “discovered” or “rediscovered” in the late eighteenth century, democratic values and ideals emerged as part of a long-term shift of concepts and practices (Keane 2009, Dunn 2005).

In keeping with the “Cultural History of Democracy” series’ mission statement, each chapter examines a concept or theme central to twenty-first century understandings of “democracy”. To avoid the dual traps of looking for the “origin” of modern concepts, and of imposing modern concepts upon seventeenth and eighteenth-century worldviews, we have commissioned

Enlightenment-era scholars to reframe the philosophical questions associated with each theme in terms of contemporary ideas, concerns and practices. This represents, by definition, a “cultural” history of democracy in the Age of Enlightenment, although admittedly one that focuses upon the concerns of intellectual history. Nevertheless, the contributors have chosen to adopt a wide array of approaches, ranging from historiography (Mosher) and history of jurisprudence (Lee) to the history of political ideas (Kingston, O’Flaherty), alongside the interaction of language and practice (Innes).

The contributions gathered in this volume do, however, implicitly acknowledge the “modernization thesis”, because they all, in their own way, engage with the grand narrative of “the Enlightenment” as the “origin” of modern democratic systems. One of the purposes of this introduction is therefore to take a step back, and explicitly reflect upon these different ways of reframing the central concepts.

II. Defining “the” Enlightenment

How do we know whether “Enlightenment” is a useful category to help us understand democracy in the period 1650-1800, unless we can somehow reconstitute a notion of the Enlightenment, if not as a unified, universal movement, then at least as an identifiable set of concerns? This can be done by focusing on a concrete subject matter that links wildly gyrating “Enlightenments”.

While we just attributed a defence of plural *Enlightenments* to Pocock, he also claimed partiality to a certain unitary meaning of Enlightenment. As context for his definition, note that for him Gibbon was no radical French *philosophe*: like Burke, he was a part of the conservative Enlightenment. But Gibbon, Burke and their political rivals were united in a preoccupation with

First ... the emergence of a system of states, founded in civil and commercial society and culture, which might enable Europe to escape from the wars of religion without falling under the hegemony of a single monarchy; second, ... a series of programs for reducing the power of either churches or congregations to disturb the peace of civil society by challenging its authority (Pocock 1999: 7).

Substituting commerce for religion was not commitment to disbelief, but it did point to political economy as the unifying lineage of Enlightenment. The instrument for taming the power of churches, in this retelling, was Hobbes' secular state.

Pocock's series title, *Barbarism and Religion*, hints at another unifying theme. If through the conquest of the Northern Barbarians, Rome entered into "religion-infused late antiquity," then the Enlightenment was about how Europe exited from that condition. It was not in order to return to Pagan Greece or Rome—the Barbarians were in this respect the agents of modernity—but to enter into the world of "civil and commercial society and culture," understood in opposition to a new concept of "savagery" elaborated "in contact with the Americas." Here we have a negative definition of Enlightenment: what it excluded, what it could not comprehend. Savages "failed to find a place in the Enlightenment project of writing history" (Pocock 2005; Winterer 2017: 29-30).

A reconstituted unitary Enlightenment was the result of a preoccupation with economy, the state, and strategies for writing history: for Pocock and others, the Enlightenment was understood as an attempt to engage with the transformative consequences of the emergence of commercial society. Istvan Hont showed that commerce had become the central political problem of the eighteenth century as commentators debated the exact nature of the interactions between trade, the state and international order. John Robertson's definition of "Enlightenment" in terms of a new enquiry into the category of "society" and a "new focus on betterment in this world" (Robertson 8-9) combined Hont's focus on political economy with Pocock's call to differentiate "Enlightenments", and explained how "national" Enlightenments (in this case Scottish and Neapolitan) were both distinct, but also related through shared preoccupations centered on economic and political reform.

How political economy brought together threads of enlightenment debate suggested not underlying thematic unity, but deep disagreement. In *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu was engaged in a four-sided debate that opposed defenders and critics of the relevance of ancient political virtue in eighteenth-century commercial societies and simultaneously opposed the partisans and sceptics regarding the alleged utopian futures of modern trade and industry. It was not easy for contemporaries to discern Montesquieu's normative commitments given that in considering all four positions this vast and sprawling book could exhibit sympathy for each of them. Nevertheless, the *Spirit of the Laws* set the terms of the debate that wound its way

through to the French Revolution and into the optimistic or pessimistic philosophies of history so characteristic of nineteenth-century thought

Yet the eighteenth-century meaning of “Enlightenment”, as Michael Sonenscher reminds us, originally “carried a theological and teleological charge.” *Lumière* was the light cast by secular theodicy faced with “the often hideous appearance of the world as it was, or the even more terminally catastrophic prospect that its future could appear to hold.” It was teleological because given these grim prospects, it was time to ask, (now that divine providence had been side-lined) “what, ultimately, human society was supposed to be for” (Sonenscher 2007: 4, 27).

There were no consensual answers, although the idea of the social contract loomed large as a method for understanding what “human society” meant. When Rousseau registered the depressing fact that humans “drift along through life as slaves of self-love,” he found secular redemption, a cure for drift and for self-love, in politics. It lay in the law and in the imaginary procedures for adopting a rational and impartial attitude, one that if shared with others created a common, that is to say public world that just might rescue individuals from their self-involved existence. A “revolutionary power lay in this new conception of contract.” (Cassirer [1932] 1951: 152-55, 265). Its light of secular redemption was the enabling character of communicable reasoning which since Hobbes had been the promise of civic involvement and common principles: release from solipsistic privacy and consequently from wars of all against all.

III. Enlightenment and Democracy

Several famous twentieth century efforts to define Enlightenment treated it precisely as a touchstone for what “ultimately” mattered. In circumstances of felt crisis, these authors also regarded the Enlightenment (with a stress on “the”) as an emergency brake applied to history. Stopping history or reminding it of where it was supposed to have gone was the project of Ernst Cassirer’s 1932 classic *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*. It was motivated by fear: “The age that venerated reason and science ... must not be lost.” His 1929 debate at Davos with existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was to join the Nazi party four years later, showed Cassirer how seductive a cult of irrationality and national belonging had become for younger intellectuals (Gordon: 2010: 291-300). Cassirer turned to what Nietzsche would have called “monumental” history, the search for a model of virtuous action from another time. From the eighteenth-century Cassirer conjured up an image of a still living presence that could tamp down the idea of fascist irresistibility. For Cassirer, “The Enlightenment” had to be presented

in “its conceptual origins ... its underlying principle ... [in] the dramatic action of its thinking ... [and in] the energy that spurs it on.” (2009: xi, xvii) A generation later an impressed Michel Foucault wrote that in this book Cassirer had addressed the fundamental alternatives: Hellenism or the Enlightenment; “tragedy or the Encyclopedia” (Wright 2001a).

Other efforts at monumentalizing the “Enlightenment” followed, for instance, the above cited Paul Hazard’s 1935 *La Crise de la conscience européenne*. The era also featured critical histories of the Enlightenment, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s 1947 *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Reinhart Koselleck’s thesis of the same title which in 1959 he published as *Critique and Crisis: The Pathogenesis of Modern Society*.

What then did the Enlightenments in any of their representations have to do with the culture of democracy? One response was: everything. The Enlightenment as precursor to liberal democratic modernity became established as a pervasive theme and very nearly a secular catechism for generations of undergraduates.

Another response was: very little. None of the major *philosophes*, including Rousseau, were radical democrats. Rousseau predicted revolution, as did nearly every major thinker, but he abhorred the idea of it. Neither Voltaire nor Jefferson liked “democracy,” the word in the case of Jefferson, the very idea of it in the case of Voltaire (Palmer 1959: 13; Dijn 2012: 790). In a widely-cited review of Jonathan Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment*, Antoine Lilti carefully deconstructed attempts to revive the modernization thesis which insists upon a “general interpretation of the Enlightenment that emphasizes its radical, materialist, and democratic current, and identifies in it the true locus of Western modernity” (173). Instead Lilti highlighted the pluralist, pluricentric nature of Enlightenment philosophy.

Several contributions in this volume can be read as case studies further undermining Israel’s presentation of the Enlightenment as the foundation of democratic “modernity” in Europe: at least two, Dorinda Outram’s and Inder Marwah’s, do so from the perspective of the voices who were excluded from this grand narrative. It has been a classic post-colonial critique of the Enlightenment to point out that its universalist ambitions were inherently Eurocentric and potentially imperialistic in nature, but Marwah’s essay uncovers the many nuances and complexities behind the failure of European actors to extend what democratic ideals or impulses they did possess to non-Europeans. Outram’s essay focuses on the masculine gendering of democracy throughout the period and shows that far from extending democratic rights to women, French revolutionaries relied on classical images of male virtue to justify the

Revolution and exclude “female corruption” from political life. In any case, as Joanna Innes shows in her contribution, eighteenth-century men and women were largely uninterested - at best - in establishing democratic institutions. “Neither American nor French revolutionaries initially aimed to establish ‘democracies’” (Innes), and the French Revolution, far from constituting an origin story for democratic modernity, reignited traditional fears of democratic rule. From a different perspective, James Stafford examines the emergence of a “paradigm of national-popular sovereignty” in the eighteenth century. He shows that even its contemporary architects identified a number of dangerous ambiguities and frailties in the international functioning of democratic governments and suggests that some of the features traditionally identified as gifts inherited from the Enlightenment, such as the identification of democratic state with the nation (the “imprisonment of democracy in the form of the territorial state”), are no longer suited to a twenty-first century characterized by the rise of trans-national economic powers.

In any interpretation, the modernization thesis needs to accommodate the fact that most philosophes sought reform, not the overthrow of governments. Accordingly, they worked with the regime in place. In Europe this meant they were monarchists: it was not the revolutionary republic, but rather the old regime monarchy that was the gift of Enlightenment to the future. Should we then search elsewhere for the origins of democracy? Or were the parliamentary aristocracy (England) and the noble *parlementaires* (France) the actual carriers of democratic principles and values?

For the latter interpretation, we turn to Daniel Roche who argued that for mid-century readers of Montesquieu, ‘monarchy was ‘the state for modern times.’ The aristocratic old monarchy preserved freedom and social differentiation, i.e. pluralism. It possessed a legal class whose ideas of “honor” justified civil resistance to the (absolute) king. A seat in the French Royal Courts (parlements) was a purchasable status but the purchasers were then expected to drop the mores of commerce and to adopt the “honor”-motivated mores of the legal class. In addition, eighteenth-century monarchy was increasingly friendly to civil liberties (Mosher 2001). These developments coincided with the emergence of a “public sphere”, where critical debate formed an educated public opinion with the ability to hold political power to account (Habermas 1962).

John Dunn argued a version of this argument, and located the origins and nature of modern liberal democracies, not solely in voting rights and the gradual extension of the franchise since the eighteenth century, but also in the long-term development of a set of values, practices and

ethical ideas including good government, the rule of law (Dunn 1992, 2005, 2014). More recently, and with a greater focus on religious ideas, so has James Kloppenberg (2016). Several essays in this volume take up this historiographical thread and identify the contribution of the Enlightenment to democratic modernity, not in the formulation of democratic theories or emergence of democratic institutions, but rather in the growing embrace of a set of cultural and legal features that would later come to characterize modern liberal democracies. These features, developed in the old regime, include rule by law, checks and balances, freedom of speech, religious tolerance: thus Niall O’Flaherty argues that several strands of Enlightenment religion rooted in the “science of man” promoted the non-institutional liberties now associated with modern liberal democracies. Looking at shifting notions of the public good in the eighteenth century, Rebecca Kingston traces how it became increasingly identified with public interest: this new understanding of the public good “as more directly informed by an aggregation of popular interests” was not necessarily tied to democratic institutions (although it could be tied to public opinion or elections), but “continues to play a role in the contemporary liberal democratic imaginary”. Yoshie Kawade dissects the various and shifting meanings of the word “liberty” in the period, and demonstrates how broad, ambiguous and sometimes discordant ideas of liberty “together wove the cultural foundation for democracy.”

Taken together, these claims reframe the old modernization thesis with a new agent of transmission. European democracy inherited both a culture and a legal structure: an aristocratic class chomping at the bit of legal absolutism. The basis for the philosophes’ reformed idea of a desacralized state was theorized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes whose doctrines of legal absolutism counterintuitively rested on a foundation of popular sovereignty (Tuck 2015). The legal evolution of both Continental and British monarchy created and sustained practices of pluralization which became a model for the acknowledgements of corporatist identities in future multicultural democracies. The legacy of the monarchical constitution presides like an unbidden ghost over democratic presidential regimes where overpowering executives are, depending on the point of view, either barely held in check by representative institutions; or capable of giving expression to popular sovereignty otherwise hampered by aristocratic checks and balances.

IV. Enlightenment and Revolution

Nevertheless, there was something missing. It was revealed by the French Revolution: the people; the legitimacy of will. As shown by Dan Lee in the opening chapter of this volume, “the modern theory of sovereignty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took a democratic turn, by locating sovereign authority not so much in the instruments of ordinary political power or its users, but in the extraordinary power of those entitled to create those instruments in the first place, the ‘people.’” Towards the end of the period then, it was discovered that norms were susceptible to breakage by revolutionary force. The voluntarism that went into moments of founding (the Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776, the Tennis Court Oath of 20 June 1789, or the abolition of French feudalism on 4 August 1789), created new principles, but also demonstrated that the people’s will was sovereign over every ethical principle.

For Pierre Rosanvallon, the rationality and voluntarism required in democracy are both virtues and pathologies. Rationality and popular will ought to run in tandem. Democratic or juridical principles guide the articulation of public will which in turn defend the prevailing norms. Nevertheless, democratic form and democratic energy, rationality and voluntarism, could also destroy one another. Regulatory rationality might suffocate citizen energy in bureaucratic inertia. Revolutionary enthusiasm could erode the norms that contain it in displays of popular “decisionism.” The people, Rosanvallon succinctly suggests, menace the political order at the same time they ground it (2006: 84-5).

We live within a new horizon of expectations that remind us of the moment when Enlightenment rationality collided with popular will. If twenty-first century democracy features various sorts of tension-ridden combinations of principle and will, the history of eighteenth-century France was clarifying simple: Enlightenment supplied the principles, Revolution supplied the will. As we have just suggested, the norms of democratic rationality were embodied in, but also trapped by monarchical form. These rationalities were released, but then suppressed, by a power that arose first in the National Assembly, then in the Clubs and then on the street – a power that showed, in the dark times of the Terror, that it could substitute itself for any norm or principle.

The Enlightenment contributed many of the forms for structuring the procedures of a modern democratic state, but on the Continent at least it had little experience until 1789 with the force and energy of popular will. British parliamentary struggles fascinated Continental observers like Montesquieu. Did he prefer an English model? Maybe – but if so, he was acutely aware of

the risk and danger which prevailed in “a frenzied struggle for public favour tempered by an elaborately structured political constitution” (Sonenscher 2007: 108). England’s “free” constitution was admirable, but it was also weakened by a loss of social anchors, and constantly ran the risk of collapse into tyranny (Montesquieu 1989: 18-19, 22, 70). This picture of the politics of popular will, written before either the American or French Revolution, seemed closer to twenty-first century democracies in crisis than it did to the consensual end of history democracies celebrated in 1989 when, to invoke Nietzschean imagery, Dionysian revolutionary will and Apollonian democratic reason concluded a provisional truce with one another. A generation later, that truce may have expired. The theodicy-dissolving *lumière* of public reason and constitutional government does not always show a way forward, as Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes remind readers in their recent sober title: *The Light That Failed: Why the West is losing the Fight for Democracy* (2020).

V. Non-Western Intimations of Democracy

One can detect in some non-Western regions versions of a “modernity” argument that suggested how a break in tradition replaced by novel ways of rethinking public space were propitious to the formation of democratic values, if not actually to the establishment of democracy. Tokugawa Japan (1601-1868), which nearly coincided with the era of Western Enlightenment, was an especially interesting example. Just as post-WW2 Western scholars looked to the Enlightenment for the values that should anchor liberal democracies, post-WW2 Japanese scholars paid renewed attention to Edo scholar Ogyu Sorai, 1666-1728 (In Japan, the family name comes first). His departure from standard Confucian apologetics for the regime represented an arguably Hobbes-like break with tradition and a conceptual leap into a kind of “modernity” (Maruyama 1974; Najita 1974)—though there were alternative interpretations (Watanabe 2012).

The orthodox Confucian (and Sinocentric) way of talking about political life in seventeenth century Japan described harmonious accord between every sphere of existence including family and public life, all connected to the principle and rituals of Li that united heaven and earth. In western political thought this was equivalent to the familiar trope of “nature”, where transcendent norms embraced both government and individual conduct, as in the classics of Plato, Aristotle and Aquinas. This “continuative” mode—as the twentieth-century activist and scholar Maruyama Masao identified the Confucian variant on nature—prescribed narrow limits

for conduct and reinforced hierarchies of obedience that foreclosed independent thought and action (Maruyama 1974: 29-31, 112, 148, 184). Ogyu Sorai, by contrast, had a different story to tell (Najita 1974: 34-40). A self-described Confucian, Sorai nevertheless appealed to China's early legalist tradition. In a move that mirrored late medieval European nominalists such as Scotus and Ockham, Ogyu Sorai argued there were no universals - only individuals who invented the universals that they needed. Government was an act of will that served utilitarian purposes. It was fabricated and artificial, but it also heralded, on Maruyama's interpretation, a modernity that was open to invention and consent. Sorai liberated subjects from nature, or rather from all the dubious claims about the alleged truths of nature that had hobbled prior ways of life. The valorisation of invention (*sakui*) as the foundation of states was, Maruyama insisted, best expressed in Hobbes' positivist adage, *autoritas, non veritas facem legem*, "authority not truth makes law" (Maruyama 1974: 149, 227, 237, 245).

This novel way of justifying the early eighteenth-century Tokugawa regime, whose actually powerful Leviathan state had brought peace to a country long burdened by war, served two unintended aims. First, it broke the continuity between personal conduct and government (the "continuative" mode) and established the fact of independent plural individuality, which was appropriate to the repudiation of universal essences and to the purely utilitarian aim of this new view of public life, namely, the exchange of obedience for liberties and protection. Second, although Sorai's innovative account of authority would (like that of Hobbes) support whatever regime was in power, it also made every regime more fragile, more open for independent minds to reflect on whether, after change and over time, the old artifices still satisfied the utilitarian purposes for which they had been established. The will of the ancient Chinese sage kings that had inspired Ogyu Sorai became the Restorationist decisionism of the samurai rebels who founded the Meiji regime in 1868 and ultimately the acts of democratic voters and protesters in the rebellious Japanese democracy that famously brought hundreds of thousands to the Diet in the Capital in order to protest the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Treaty in 1960. For Maruyama, an active participant in the protests that rocked 1960s Japan, the democratic potential of Japan was dependent on establishing the legitimacy of horizontal relations, established in the West, he thought, by the social contract tradition.

In praising the iconoclast Ogyu Sorai, Maruyama criticized mainstream seventeenth century Confucianism because it straitjacketed personal conduct in conformity to the requirements of government. It should be noted that this linkage of government and the disciplining of personal

conduct was not unlike the requirement of “virtue” in European republican ideology of the same era.

There was, however, a road to nationalist pathology inherent in Ogyu Sorai’s Hobbes-like nominalism, which was exploited by the late Tokugawa National Studies movement. Its central figure, Mootori Norinaga (1730-1801), pressed nominalism into the defence of the singularity of Japanese culture (Najita 1974: 56-58). A seemingly non-political aesthetic aim established the politically authoritative individuality of the country while dismissing as non-applicable any universal standards that would have held the nation to account. Aesthetics became nationalist politics as a spinoff of the nominalist claim that assertive individuality was all anyone had. On the same nominalist grounds, the promise of individual liberation and critical reflectiveness contained within eighteenth-century Tokugawa modernity was transformed into a demand for cultural conformity to the aesthetically beautiful nation of the Meiji foundation: *sonno, jōi*, “revere the emperor, expel the barbarian.” This was not the republican norm of patriotism that called for a connection between citizen and nation, but the uncritical surrender of subjects to a state that had absorbed the democratic nation into itself.

VI. Dreamers of Democracy

The revolutionary overthrow of established governments on two Continents awakened minds to unseen possibilities. From this cauldron of revolutionary fervour (English Civil War, 1688, the American and French Revolutions) came many of the modern classics of political thought. For Robert Wokler, the creation of new social and political orders also “gave special purchase, among the Enlightenment’s most central doctrines, to Montesquieu’s notion of a democratic republic and Rousseau’s ideal of popular sovereignty” (Wokler 2006: 688-9). Revolutionary events turned what had been only imagined possibilities or reconstituted historical memories into actual transformative experience that required conceptual articulation, which was suitably provided by these doctrinal statements.

If events opened up new meanings in old classics, pre-revolutionary ideas still played a formative role in late eighteenth-century events. The very procedures of seventeenth-century social contract thinking presupposed a capacity to extricate oneself from everyday life and to deliberate about the rational principles for remaking political order. Even as fiction, this procedure was a spur to the political imagination. An additional incentive lay in the restored

memories of democratic antiquity, Renaissance Italian city states, and Puritan revolution which fed enlightened imaginations. In both North America and in France, Thomas Paine gave exquisite expression to the transformative hope of such sentiments: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again” (*Common Sense*), “What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude. The one was the wonder of the ancient world; the other is becoming the admiration and power of the present” (*Rights of Man Part the Second*) (Paine 2014: 46, 286).

The revolutionary generation in Europe enthusiastically re-read Enlightenment classics in the light of novel egalitarian expectations. Despite an earlier generation’s understanding that for Montesquieu monarchy was the regime for modern times, a view which has endured (Sonenscher 2007: 95-172), in the 1780s it became possible to describe Montesquieu as neo-Machiavellian and a secret Harringtonian (or radical republican) despite the author’s explicit criticism of both authors. At the beginning of the Revolution, Sieyès, Roederer and their allies treated Rousseau’s elective aristocracy as a version of Sieyès’ representative government and roughly what Montesquieu had intended by legal monarchy governed by pluralist intermediary powers. By 1795 however, Gracchus Babeuf was far from alone in claiming that Rousseau (like the far more evident Abbé de Mably) was actually a leveller. As Paine’s example above suggests for England, in France, too, “eighteenth-century evaluations of the ancient Greek idea of democracy turned from negative to positive” (Sonenscher 2008: 45, 407-8, 4).

Nevertheless, neither Montesquieu’s democratic republic nor Rousseau’s popular sovereignty translated particularly well into the eventual realities of the large commercial and military democracies that first emerged in revolutionary France and America, and then, gradually, all over the globe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Enlightenment-era ideal conceptions of democracy instead appeared either to mask or to indict what happened during and after the late eighteenth-century revolutionary era.

Meanwhile, the egalitarians among the American and French revolutionaries found themselves entangled in the experience of monarchical government. They had a choice. Either disclaim the force of the past and in a path clearing gesture, establish a democratic government that gave unfiltered expression to a sovereign people. Or acknowledge path dependency and establish democratic sovereignty filtered through the mechanisms of

monarchical constitutional inheritance, e.g. intermediary powers, separation of powers. Proponents of the latter option drew significant inspiration from the eighteenth-century discovery, as Montesquieu explained in the case of England, that democracies or republics made their historical appearance by “hiding” in monarchical forms (Montesquieu 1989: 70). As they so often did, Scottish writers followed Montesquieu in their own historical narratives, and identified the emergence of polished social manners and civil liberties as the main feature of a modernity that would increasingly translate to demands for government accountability (Plassart 2015). Montesquieu and the Scots subsequently inspired a long line of nineteenth-century writers who feared the effect of this ahistorical dream of democracy on the constitutional organization of states. Instead they advocated what had once been models for pluralist forms of monarchy as the suitable constitutional structure for containing and expressing democratic impulses.

Yet enlightened discourses combined with revolutionary experience had created a hope in the eventual triumph of democratic republicanism. It was first manifested in the Jacobin and Jeffersonian dream of a democracy unleashed from monarchical encumbrance and prior compromise. As the decades rolled by, however, the idealism which post-revolutionary thinkers had seized upon in Montesquieu’s democratic republicanism and Rousseau’s popular sovereignty instead cast an obscuring veil over the regimes that actually emerged, whose traces of monarchical encumbrance compromised the break-through dream of popular rule.

Once the pre-revolutionary dream of democracy had been decidedly rural, bucolic, and arrayed against the temptations and luxury of the city. This tendency was illustrated in the most revolutionary novel of the eighteenth century, Archbishop Fenelon’s *The Adventures of Telemachus, Son of Ulysses* (1699). It was an indictment of everything Louis XIV and his minister Colbert had done to create a powerful mercantilist military kingdom. To this defective state Fenelon counterpoised the virtues of an imaginary Boetica, a small agrarian republic, and Salentum, a model of a reformed, less luxurious and less corrupt kingdom. Even more amazingly, this reading was intended as tutorial for the grandson of Louis XIV. Later in the century in *Emile*, Rousseau had it on the tutorial reading list given to the ideally educated Sophie. It was popular with republicans and reforming monarchs alike. Revolutionaries in the 1790s thought that Fenelon along with Voltaire and Rousseau deserved to be interred in the Pantheon (Sonenscher 2007: 474). The Physiocrat economists were Fenelonian in the sense that they also thought that Colbert and Louis XIV had corrupted France through the pursuit of

luxury and inequality and through encouraging the bloated expansion of cities at the expense of the countryside.

The most popular novel of the eighteenth century had effectively delegitimized the whole course of European political, economic, and social development. It also described what was to be done: forcibly expel a luxury loving and corrupt people from the cities back into the virtuous but destitute countryside.

In conclusion, eighteenth-century ideas of democracy inherited from constitutional monarchy the latter's plural structures of power competition among competing elites. In pre-revolutionary Europe, elite competition had aided in preserving a measure of law and liberty in otherwise centralized and potentially tyrannical large territorial monarchies. The potentially tyrannical monarchy was not different structurally, as Tocqueville later indicated, from the potential for tyranny in majoritarian democracy. Consequently, whether in Montesquieu's description of English and French monarchy or Tocqueville's picture of American democracy, there is a common stress on anchors or blockages that might tame power.

Anchors, however, inhibited both the will of the monarch and the will of a democratic majority. As democratic theorist Sheldon Wolin observed, "Democratization ... was not a primary factor in the formation of the [U.S.] constitution." The eighteenth-century dream became for Wolin in the early twenty-first century a merely "fugitive democracy." The latter was "a perennial opposition" and "a reflection of the necessarily episodic character and limitations of democratic action" (Wolin 2016: x). Even earlier the American Progressives chafed at the inherited constitutional encumbrances that had anchored the lineage of modern democracy in the legacies of a moribund and in their view increasingly irrelevant constitution. In 1898 Progressive historian Henry Jones Ford presciently seized upon the American presidency as the instrument for disposing of constitutional blockages to democracy. A "master force," the presidency was "the only organ sufficient for the exercise of [popular] sovereignty." In an extraordinary phrase, Ford suggested that "the greatness of the presidency ... was the work of the people breaking through constitutional form" (Orren and Skowronek 2017: 123-4).

“Breaking through constitutional form” might mean the triumph of popular rights, but it could also mean trampling on the rights of other people. Europe in the 1930s was a test case. For Jan-Werner Müller, the reaction to the effort to establish a “purified German *Volksgemeinschaft*” led after 1945 to another swing of the pendulum toward distrust of democracy: “Western Europeans fashioned a highly *constrained* form of democracy deeply imprinted with a distrust of popular sovereignty—in fact, even distrust of traditional parliamentary democracy” (Muller 2011: 128). Paine’s “we have it in our power to begin the world over again” has ever since the era of democratic revolutions filled successive generations with either hope or dread.

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